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Reconciliation by Archival Means:
Library of Congress Subject Headings in a Canadian Context

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INTRODUCTION

The Digital Research Centre at the University of Saskatchewan works with graduate students and professors for their research. They also work with academic organizations who are seeking to digitize their content for wider availability. In the process, digital scholars are concerned with the **life cycle of digital assets**, which relies heavily on discoverability (see *Fig. 1*).

(Fig. 1, image from: https://filecamp.com/lp/digital-asset-lifecycle/)
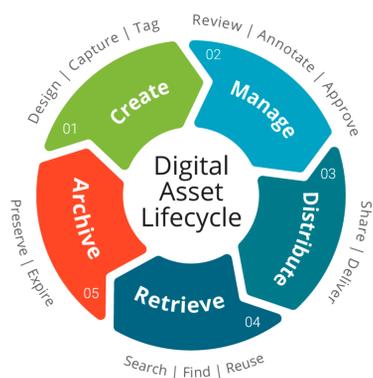
They ensure discoverability through the meticulous assignment of **metadata** and even more meticulous classification of that metadata in the database. This is done so that all we need to do is enter a couple of keywords, and we get relevant research material coming from both Canadian and international databases. The mechanisms behind this, however, are known only to a few, and there are several issues with it.

IMPORTANT TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Metadata: Put simply: data regarding data; this includes, but is not limited to, resource name, author information, language, origin, genre, subjects, etc. It is basically any information regarding the resource that would make finding it, either physically or digitally, much easier.

Subject Headings: Specific words that would organize metadata per topic. These make our one word or phrase searches in the library system turn up hundreds if not thousands of results.

THE PROBLEM

What makes this convenient discoverability of materials in and across databases is mainly the use of the **Library of Congress Subject Headings** (**LCSH**) by most databases currently in use. Recent evaluations of the LCSH, however, all point to the fact that these Subject Headings are somewhat problematic in a Canadian setting, especially when describing materials by or about the Indigenous peoples of Canada. Multiple sources emphasize the historic culturally insensitive nature of the LCSH towards Indigenous peoples. This is of special concern to Canadian archives and libraries because Canada is still in the process of reconciliation with its Indigenous peoples.

The **purpose** of this research was to bring attention to the issues surrounding the use of these subject headings and to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the alternatives to the **LCSH** formerly or currently being considered. It also proposes actions which most – if not all – parties involved can take to aid in the process of reconciliation in Canada.

FINDINGS

Canadian Subject Headings

There was an attempt to make a separate list of headings that were specific to Canada. According to Library and Archives Canada (**LAC**), the Canadian Subject Headings (**CSH**) are designed to describe "Canadian topics not adequately covered in the Library of Congress Subject Headings." **CSH** is currently maintained within the Online Computer Library Center's library management system. As of last year, possibly due to the cost of maintaining it, **LAC** stopped supporting **CSH**. It could also be because the Library of Congress has also begun cataloguing Canadian content.

As for its description of indigenous content, it differs slightly from the LCSH's terms, which could negatively affect discoverability for non-Canadian users because they might not use or even know the terms. The **CSH** is available for access and use upon request to **LAC.**

MARC 21 field 386 and Library of Congress Demographic Group Terms

The Library of Congress Demographic Group Terms (**LCDGT**) is another set of controlled vocabulary meant to describe a resource's target audience. These are currently in use in MARC 21 field 386, a bibliographic area for creator terminology. According to Elizabeth Hobart, the **LCDGT** "does show promise for better describing resources and increasing search options" because of its higher specificity, but it is still arguably "biased toward dominant groups" (2). Most studies on the **LCDGT** are positive in response due to its use of creator terminology, something which other controlled vocabularies, like the **LCSH**, do not do.

There is, however, the accuracy-discoverability problem with this again: It is held that an item's discoverability drops when accuracy in its description rises because not everyone will know the more specific terms. This is seen as one of the greatest obstacle to even attempting reconciliation through archival means.

AMA–MAIN

Last, but definitely not the least, is the University of Manitoba's project, in tandem with the Association of Manitoba Archives (**AMA**), of creating a database of standardized descriptions that would "better describe material about or by Indigenous peoples" (Bone & Lougheed 1) to increase discoverability of the province's archival materials.

FINDINGS

AMA–MAIN (continued)

Some problems arose with making their own controlled vocabulary, so they imported some from the **LCSH**, but modified them to make them more culturally appropriate. They filtered through the **LCSH** vocabulary to find items that might warrant change, and they released an Excel file to reflect those findings. One of the ways they did this is the replacement of the term *Indian* with *Indigenous.* This might sound like a simple fix, but the whole process took 2 years. They found over 1000 potential changes or deletions because of this category. Vocabulary specific for Manitoba's Indigenous peoples was also added:

The **AMA** encourages all archives to use their suggestions for change as they see fit in their own databases because they acknowledge that all archives are unique. Either way, this project seems like a promising route to approach the accuracy-discoverability problem.

(Fig. 2, screenshot from: LCSH Changes in MAIN (xls))

CONCLUSION

There are advantages and disadvantages to the continued usage of the **Library of Congress Subject Headings**, and switching to an alternative, no matter its advantages, is not that simple. However, there are actions that all everyone can take in order to make the situation as less problematic as possible. It all starts with cultural awareness for both users and managers of archives alike, and that can only be fully realized through collaboration with Indigenous communities and scholars.

Many claim that reconciliation might not entirely be possible in archival contexts because the situation will always be one defined by compromise between accuracy/specificity and discoverability, but with time, effort, and continued support of the process, it does not have to continue to be so.

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